

# PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT MIGRATION IN BELGIUM: CONTINUITY OR CHANGE? (2002–2014)

*An overview of the results of the European Social Survey (ESS) in Belgium*

LAURA JACOBS, CELINE WUYTS AND GEERT LOOSVELDT



The European Social Survey (ESS) has been organized bi-annually in a large number of European countries since 2002. Belgium has participated in each ESS round.

The ESS study in Belgium is prepared, conducted and valorized by the Centre for Survey Methodology (KU Leuven) for Flanders, and by the Centre d'Etude de l'Opinion (Université de Liège) for Wallonia.

The ESS questionnaire consists of a set of questions that are presented in every ESS round, as well as modules with questions on special topics. In 2002 and 2014, citizens were asked in detail about migration. In this report, we offer an overview of the main results for Belgium in terms of public opinion about migration.

## Table of contents

Introduction.....	3
About the European Social Survey (ESS) .....	4
Support for migration .....	5
The (dis)advantages of migration .....	6
Group-specific differences .....	9
The overestimation of the number of migrants .....	13
More contact with minorities .....	14
The role of background characteristics.....	16
Conclusion .....	24
Literature suggestions.....	26

## Introduction

Migration represents a phenomenon that has existed over time: for centuries, large groups of people have relocated to other nations for varied reasons. Today, rising ethnic diversity in Western Europe has become the new reality. Successfully uniting citizens from diverse backgrounds, traditions and cultures is challenging, and the transition to a multicultural society often brings with it a few tensions.

In 2015, the most recent ‘refugee crisis’ erupted. This reached its peak in spring the same year, and it is considered one of the most severe migration crises that the European Union (EU) has faced since its foundation after World War II. The underlying reasons for rising migration are manifold and complex. Many migrants are in search of a better future and aim to escape conflict, persecution, bad living conditions and political instability. The origins of the current refugee crisis can be attributed to a combination of geopolitical, humanitarian and socioeconomic factors.

Migration presents one of the most challenging issues that our current society has to address. Mastering rising migration flows, preventing tragedies and human disasters near the borders on migration routes, the realization of a sustainable and humanitarian solution, and the eradication of human trafficking: all these issues have dominated EU political debates during the last few years. On 31 August 2015, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke the historic words: *Wir schaffen das* (We can do it). Negotiations about a common EU migration policy led to fierce debate among EU leaders and institutions. Migration, and the way current and future generations deal with it best, remains a relevant and hot topic to date; one that stirs emotions, leads to tensions, and feeds many political discussions and societal debates.

In this report, based on an analysis of the 2002 and 2014 Belgian data from the European Social Survey (ESS), we examine public opinion – and its evolution over time – about migration. Using representative and objective data from the ESS, the main purpose is to contribute to the debate about migration by offering an insight into the dominant trends and patterns in perceptions. This report mostly entails a descriptive presentation of the data for Belgium and presents a first step in the identification of societal groups that differ in their views about migration. The report can be considered as supplementing recent scientific literature – of which we include a non-exhaustive list at the end of the document – about the complex causes of anti-migration attitudes.

## About the European Social Survey (ESS)

The European Social Survey is a large-scale comparative study that asks citizens from more than 20 European countries about their attitudes to a wide variety of political, economic and social topics. The ESS is internationally recognized as a prestigious cross-national survey, which makes use of representative samples and maintains high methodological standards, in order to map public opinion in Europe (more information is available at <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>). The ESS has been conducted bi-annually since 2002. Its goal is to document and analyse the long-term development of public opinion throughout Europe about a wide range of topics. Belgium has participated in all eight ESS rounds to date. The selection of respondents in Belgium is carried out as follows: a sample is drawn from the Belgian National Register, which is representative for all people over 15 years of age who live in private households in the country, regardless of their nationality, citizenship or language. In total, about 1700 to 1900 respondents are surveyed during each ESS round. **TABLE 1** displays the number of respondents that have participated in the various ESS rounds in Belgium.

**TABLE 1.** *Overview of the number of respondents in the ESS rounds*

ESS round	Number of respondents	Response rate
Round 1 (2002)	1899	59.2%
Round 2 (2004)	1778	61.4%
Round 3 (2006)	1798	61.1%
Round 4 (2008)	1760	58.9%
Round 5 (2010)	1704	53.4%
Round 6 (2012)	1869	58.7%
Round 7 (2014)	1769	57.0%

The ESS makes use of face-to-face interviews that take approximately one hour. The survey questionnaire consists of a number of fixed questions that are included in every round. In addition to these, each ESS round includes two thematic modules that go into greater detail about a set of present-day and relevant themes. In addition to general questions about migration that are in every round, the ESS rounds in 2002 (round 1) and 2014 (round 7) included a specific module concerning migration. This contained a large set of questions with the main purpose of obtaining a better insight into the opinion of European citizens about migration. The repetition of this module makes it possible to examine the evolution over time of public opinion about migration.

For all the analyses, weighting was used to control for differences in the probability of selection of respondents (post-stratification weighting). More information about the

sampling procedure, response rates and data collection can be retrieved from the [process evaluation](#) page on the website of the Centre for Survey Methodology (KU Leuven) or from the ESS website: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

## Support for migration

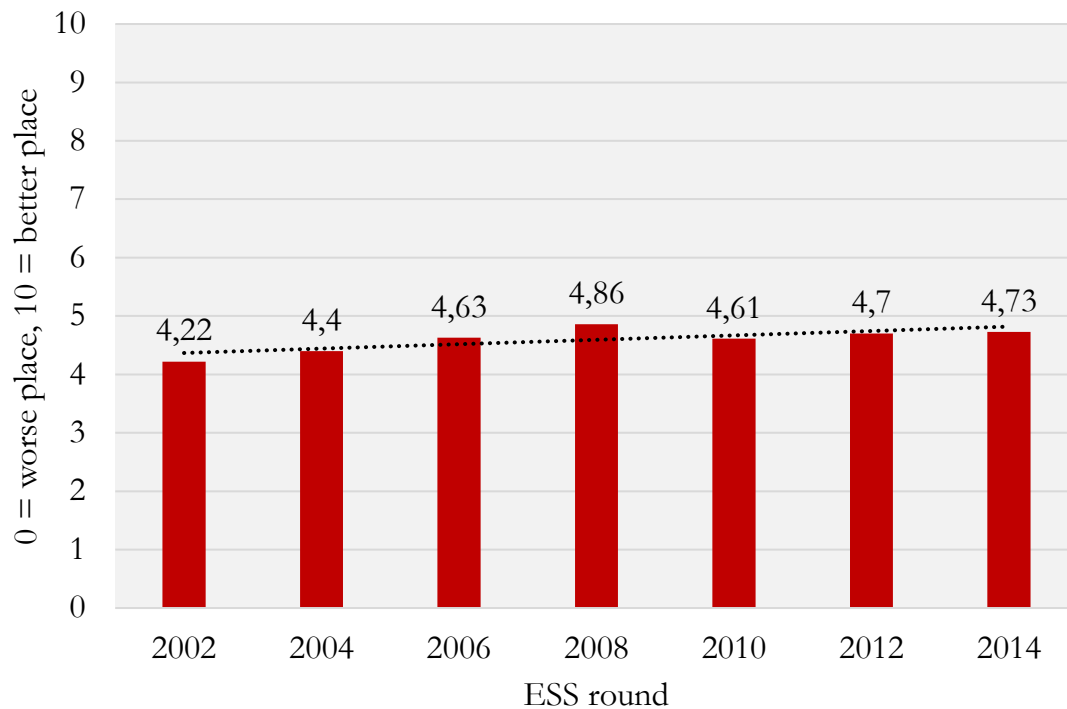
We begin by examining the results of a survey question that deals with general support for migration. Each respondent had to answer the following question on a scale from 0 to 10: ‘Is Belgium made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?’ A higher score points to a more positive attitude toward migration. This question was included in all the ESS rounds from 2002 to 2014. **FIGURE 1** shows that people in general are slightly negative about migration, as can be derived from the scores for all the years that are lower than five (five represents a neutral attitude). We note a slight evolution over time, with respondents – apart from a minor reversal after 2008 – becoming more positive about migration: the differences are small, but statistically significant.<sup>1</sup> The opinion of respondents about migration, measured by this one general question, is thus characterized by modest change. Below, we examine whether we can find a similar positive trend for other questions that deal with the (perceived) consequences of migration.

In this regard it should be noted that the higher tolerance in 2014 cannot be explained by the fact that the sample includes more respondents with a migration background. If we only consider respondents without a migration background, we observe the same rise in tolerance. However, it is true that in general, respondents with a migration background are slightly more positive concerning migration. Nevertheless, the findings do not fully explain the rise in tolerance over the years.

---

<sup>1</sup> The level of significance indicates whether a given effect can be attributed to coincidence. The goal is to minimize the chance that a given effect can only be explained by coincidence; therefore, we only consider significant effects, which we can be certain have been estimated in a reliable way. The level of significance that we respect here is a confidence interval of 95 per cent. This signifies that, with 95 per cent reliability, we can say that a result cannot be attributed to coincidence.

**FIGURE 1.** *‘Is Belgium made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?’*



### The (dis)advantages of migration

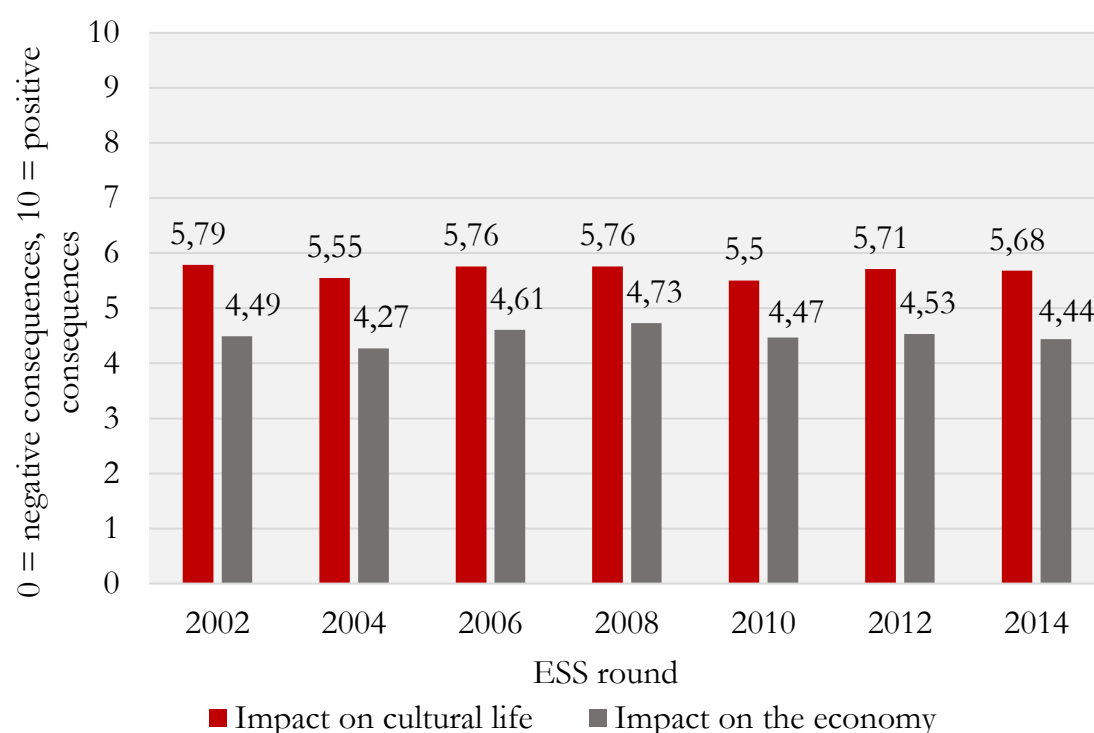
Fierce political debates are sometimes held about the (dis)advantages of migration for society. How do Belgian respondents perceive the consequences of increasing levels of migration for the economy in general (and the labour market and social security in particular) and the safety of the country? Also, what is the impact of rising diversity on the national culture? Five questions were presented in the ESS (overview in **TABLE 2**) that deal with the perception of participants regarding the consequences of migration for the economy, crime and culture in Belgium. The questions about the consequences for the economy in general and the national culture were included in all seven ESS rounds. The questions concerning the impact on the labour market, expenditure on social security, and crime were only presented in the specific migration modules included in the ESS round 1 (2002) and round 7 (2014). Respondents had to indicate on a scale ranging from 0 to 10 to what extent they agreed with five statements. For each statement, a score of 0 indicates a very negative attitude to migration, and a score of 10 a very positive attitude.

**TABLE 2.** *Questions in the ESS about the consequences of migration for the economy (general and specific), culture and crime*

1	‘Would you say it is generally bad or good for Belgium’s economy that people come to live here from other countries?’
2	‘Would you say that people who come to live here generally take jobs away from workers in Belgium, or generally help to create new jobs?’
3	‘Most people who come to live here work and pay taxes. They also use health and welfare services. On balance, do you think people who come here take out more than they put in or put in more than they take out?’
4	‘Are Belgium’s crime problems made worse or better by people coming to live here from other countries?’
5	‘Would you say that Belgium’s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?’

**FIGURE 2** shows that Belgian respondents mostly paid attention to the alleged negative influence of migration, even though there are differences depending on the issue that is examined. We first consider the assessment of consequences for the national culture and the economy in general, questions about which were included in each ESS round. With regard to the impact on the nation’s culture, respondents were slightly positive: the average is just above five, indicating that the arrival of people from other countries is seen as enriching the national culture rather than having an undermining effect. With regard to the economic impact, respondents were less optimistic, particularly in 2004, 2010 and 2014. The reduction in 2004 may be due to the eastward EU enlargement, while the results from 2010 onwards may be attributed to the worldwide economic crisis that erupted in full force after 2008. A comparison between the multiple ESS rounds does show, however, that the assessments of the consequences of migration are quite stable over time, with temporal differences not being significant. Overall, the evaluation of the economic and cultural consequences of migration remained more or less unchanged.

**FIGURE 2.** *The consequences of migration for the economy (in general) and for cultural life*



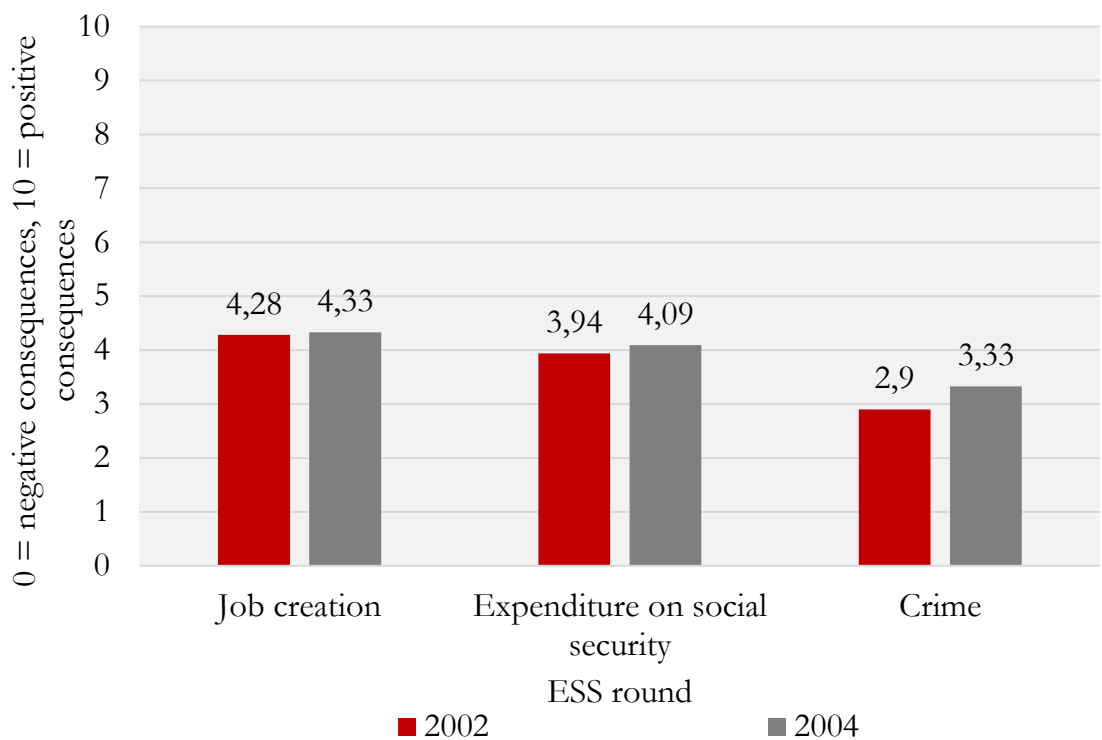
In **FIGURE 3** we show the perceived consequences for the labour market and social security (specific economic consequences), and for crime. These questions were, as mentioned before, only part of the specific migration modules included in ESS round 1 (2002) and round 7 (2014). Again, a higher score points to more positive perceived consequences. Most respondents believe that the arrival of people from abroad costs the Belgian state more than these migrants contribute, and that their arrival takes away jobs from Belgian employees. With regard to the economic dimension, many respondents thus have a negative outlook on the consequences of migration. However, the assessment of respondents about the consequences of migration for crime issues is even more negative: the average scores in 2002 (2.9) and 2014 (3.3) indicate that only a limited number of Belgian respondents believe that the arrival of people from other countries has a positive influence on crime numbers. A comparison between the perceived consequences for culture, the economy and safety makes it clear that respondents are mostly wary regarding the consequences of migration for crime numbers, rather than its potentially detrimental impact on the nation's culture, labour market or social expenditure.

Over time, we note a minor, positive evolution in terms of the perceived consequences of migration: in 2014, the scores on the statements that migration leads to the creation of more jobs and that migrants contribute more than they cost were higher than before. This confirms evolutions toward more general support for migration. Nevertheless,



the differences remain small, and mostly the continuity stands out, even though the differences are significant.

**FIGURE 3.** *The consequences of migration for the creation of jobs, social security (specific economic consequences) and crime*



### Group-specific differences

Not every migrant group was appraised in a similar way by the respondents. Apparently, there is a hierarchy or preference for particular groups that have come to settle in Belgium. More specifically, attitudes about the arrival of various different migrant groups were examined in all the ESS rounds (groups with the same ethnicity/race, with a different ethnicity/race, and groups coming from poor countries outside Europe). In the ESS round 7 (2014), respondents were additionally asked about the number of Jews, Muslims and Gypsies that should be permitted to come and live in Belgium. The exact questions are shown in [TABLE 3](#). The answer scale comprised four categories, ranging from 1 (‘allow many to come and live here’) to 4 (‘allow none to come and live here’). Hence, a higher score points to less support for a particular migrant group to come and live in Belgium.

In terms of the preference for diverse types of migrant groups (displayed in [FIGURE 4](#)), we note that Belgian respondents prefer to see people coming from the same ethnicity/race, compared with people of a different ethnicity/race or people originating from

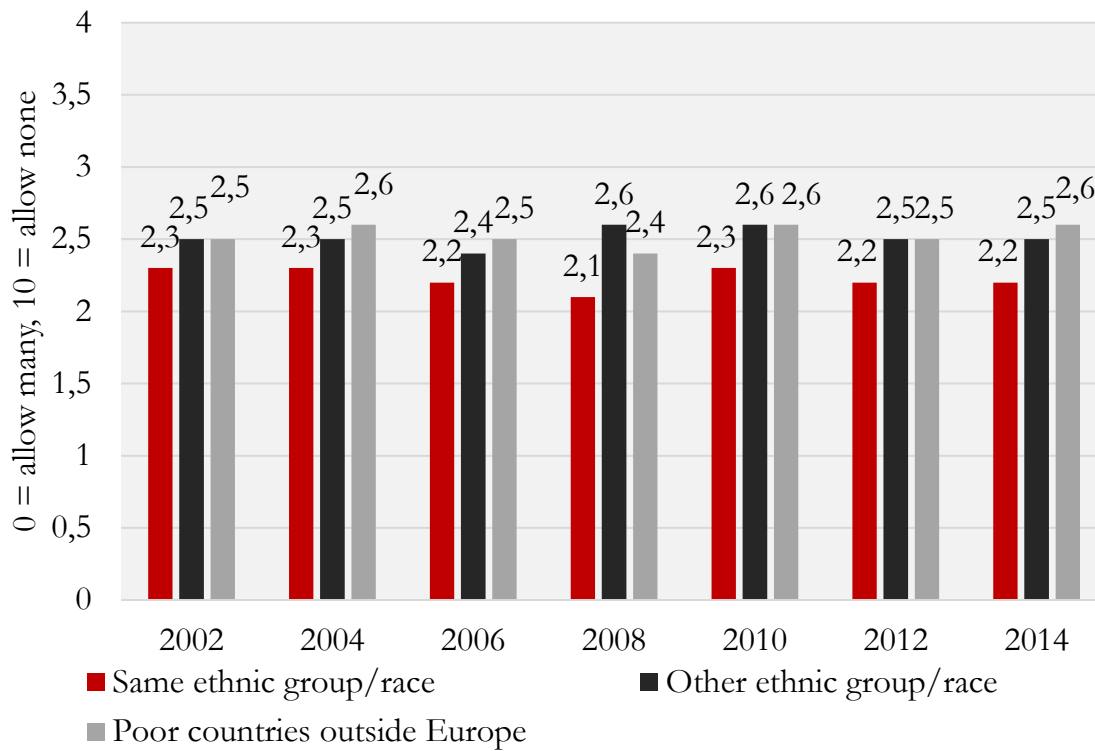
poor countries outside Europe. Hence, economic and cultural factors seem to play a role in the evaluation of newcomers, even though the differences are not very large.

**TABLE 3.** *Questions in ESS about different types of migrant groups*

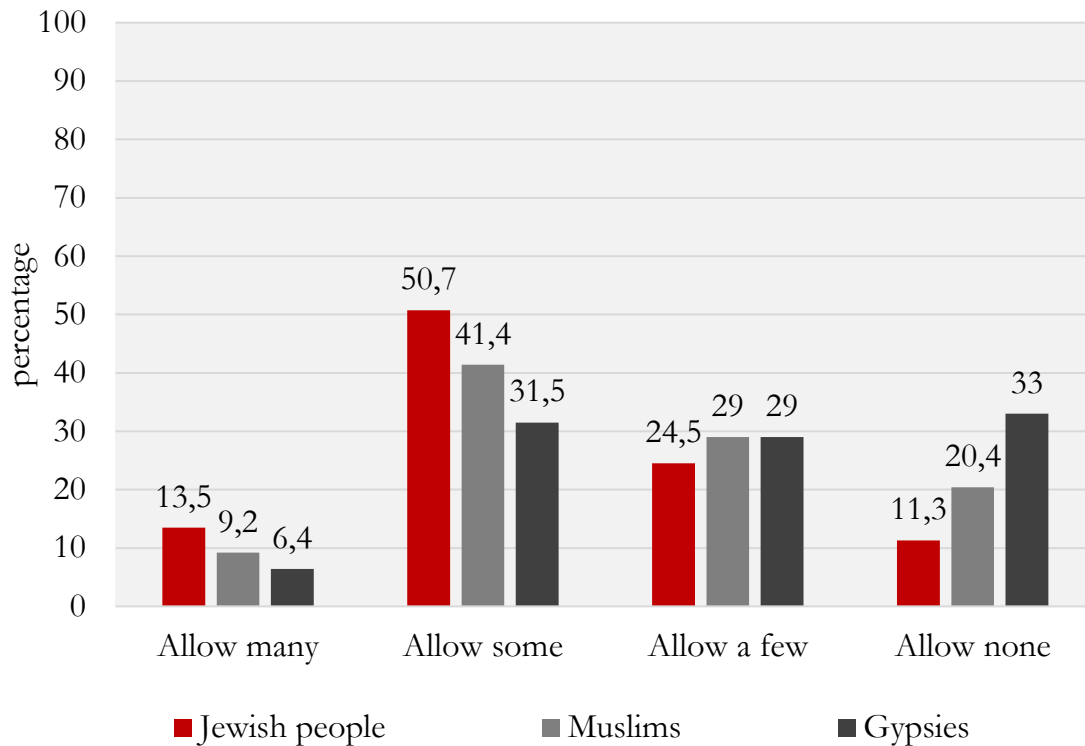
1	‘To what extent do you think Belgium should allow people of the same race or ethnic group as most Belgian people to come and live here?’
2	‘To what extent do you think Belgium should allow people of a different race or ethnic group from most Belgian people to come and live here?’
3	‘To what extent do you think Belgium should allow people from the poorer countries outside Europe to come and live here?’
4	‘To what extent do you think Belgium should allow Jewish people from other countries to come and live here?’
5	‘To what extent do you think Belgium should allow Muslims from other countries to come and live here?’
6	‘To what extent do you think Belgium should allow Gypsies from other countries to come and live here?’

For the specific migrant groups, we note a more distinct preference: the results show that respondents would prefer Jewish people rather than Muslims and Gypsies to come and live in Belgium. This can be clearly seen in **FIGURE 5**. While 14 per cent of the respondents are willing to allow many Jewish migrants, this figure is only 10 per cent and 7 per cent respectively for Muslims and Gypsies. Approximately 10 per cent of the respondents are unwilling to allow any Jewish people at all, while almost 20 per cent and more than 30 per cent of the respondents do not want to allow respectively any Muslims and Gypsies. This leads us to conclude that not all ethnic and religious (minority) groups and migrants are evaluated in a similar way: respondents in Belgium make a clear distinction between various migrant groups. Jewish people are more welcome than Muslims, and Belgians are especially not happy to allow Gypsies to come and live here. It may be possible that particular characteristics that are attributed to these various groups may explain why public opinion tends to be more or less positive toward a specific group.

**FIGURE 4.** *‘To what extent do you think Belgium should allow people of the same race and ethnic group, of a different race and ethnic group, from poorer countries outside Europe to come and live here?’*



**FIGURE 5.** *‘To what extent do you think Belgium should allow Jewish people, Muslims or Gypsies from other countries to come and live here?’*



## Feelings of superiority

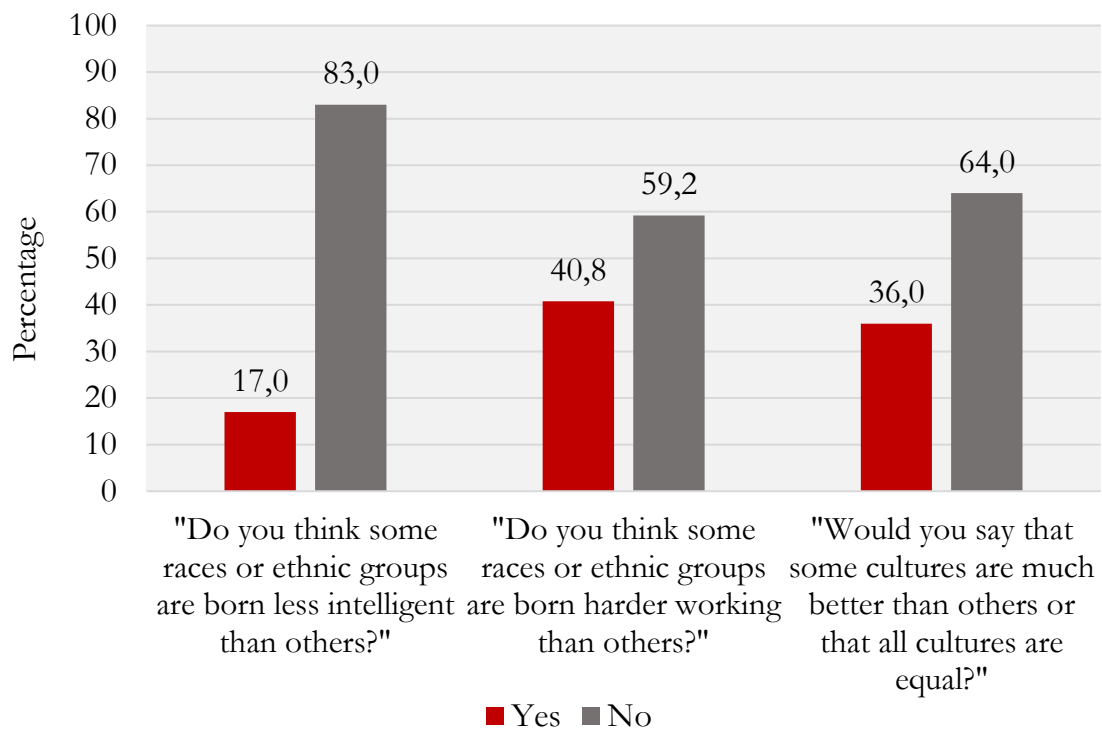
In 2014, respondents were asked about their feelings regarding superiority, or the idea that some cultures, races or ethnic groups are preferable to others. This is often labelled as cultural or biological racism. These terms refer to the view that humankind can be categorized into distinct racial or ethnic groups, while attributing various characteristics to these groups that offer the basis for a classification or hierarchical order. Specifically, three questions were included in the ESS round 7 about feelings of superiority (shown in **TABLE 4**). These had to be answered by either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. A ‘yes’ indicates agreement with the statement that some races or ethnic groups are born as less intelligent or as less hard working, and that some cultures are better than others.

**TABLE 4.** *Questions in the ESS about superiority*

1	‘Do you think some races or ethnic groups are born less intelligent than others?’
2	‘Do you think some races or ethnic groups are born harder working than others?’
3	‘Thinking about the world today, would you say that some cultures are much better than others or that all cultures are equal?’

The results are included in **FIGURE 6**. In total, 17 per cent of the respondents agree that some races or ethnic groups are born less intelligent than others. For the other two statements about working hard and superior cultures, the percentages are even higher: about 41 per cent and 36 per cent respectively of the respondents agree with the statements that some races or ethnic groups are born as harder working than others and that some cultures are much better than others. Hence, for a specific segment of the population, the idea is still very much alive that on some dimensions, particular groups and cultures are preferred over others. These respondents believe that various races and ethnic groups differ in terms of biological and cultural traits, and that particular groups perform better on these particular characteristics.

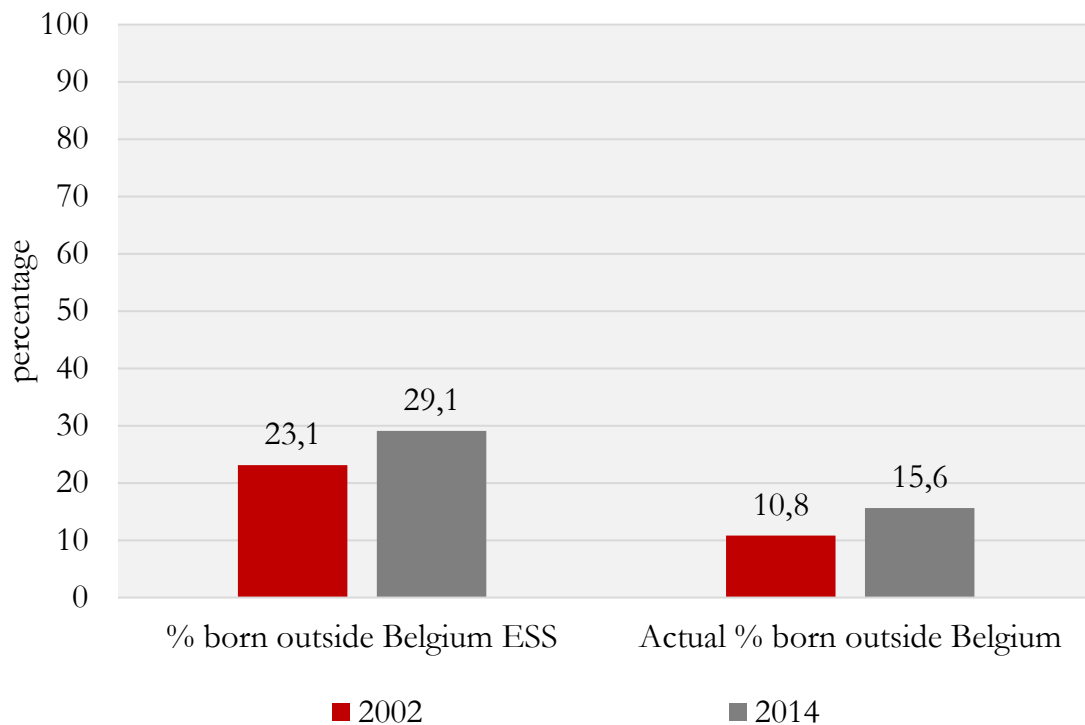
**FIGURE 6.** *Feelings of superiority in terms of intelligence, working hard and culture*



### The overestimation of the number of migrants

Research often shows that people are not very skilful at estimating the actual number of migrants that are present in their country, meaning that they often have a distorted image of real-life diversity (see the study by Strabac from 2011 quoted in the Literature suggestions section). Hence, respondents were asked in 2002 and 2014 to estimate how many out of every 100 people living in Belgium were born outside the country. The findings shown in **FIGURE 7** confirm that respondents systematically overestimated the number of people born outside Belgium. According to official figures from Statbel (The Belgian Statistical Office) in 2000, about 9 per cent of the Belgian population had a different nationality, and about 11 per cent in 2015 (although it should be noted that the number of people born abroad is probably higher in reality, because many have acquired Belgian nationality). Considering the average percentage, however, we can note that the respondents in 2002 believed that about 23 per cent of the population was born outside Belgium, and this figure was about 30 per cent in 2014. These scores are higher than the actual numbers. The tendency to overestimate seems to have increased over time, which is a correct reflection of the real-life evolution, but the actual numbers perceived are nevertheless skewed.

**FIGURE 7.** *‘Out of every 100 people living in Belgium, how many do you think were born outside Belgium?’*



### More contact with minorities

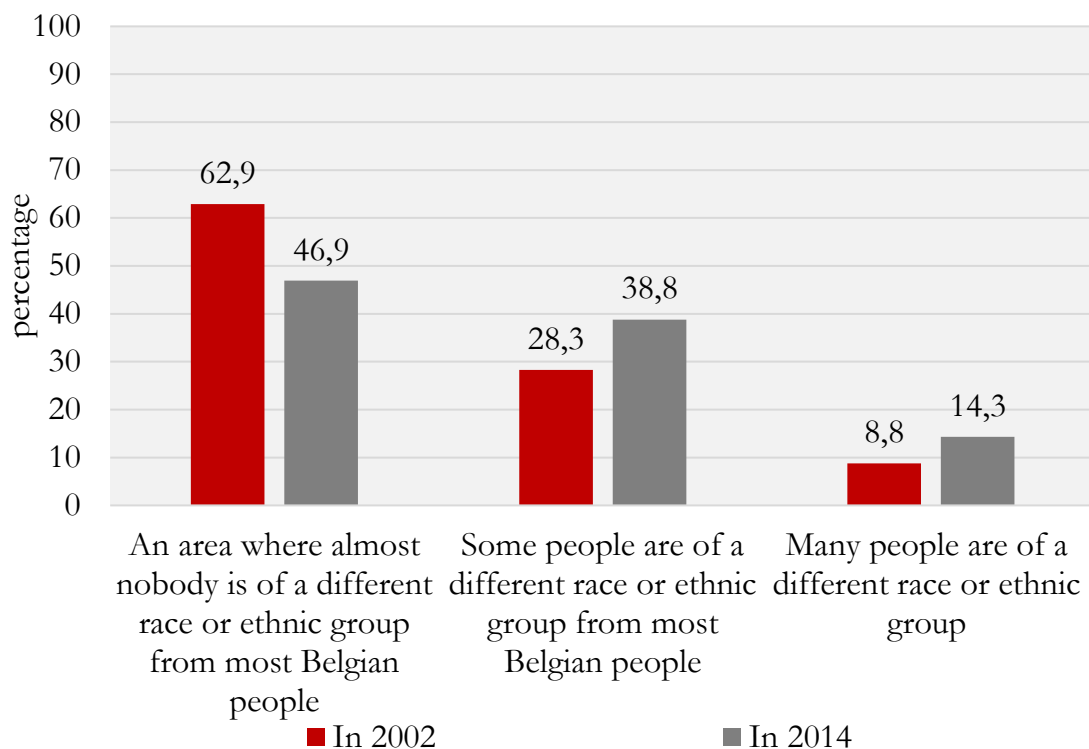
One potential explanation for why people seem to be more positive today about migrants may lie in the fact that these groups are increasingly present in society, which also leads to a higher likelihood that people sustain meaningful contacts with them. The expectation is that engaging in and sustaining (friendship) ties with people from these groups will lead to more tolerance, because people will learn more about their way of life and will develop a higher level of empathy. Is it a correct assumption that people in 2014 more often entered into contact with migrants and minorities than in 2002?

The findings show that respondents had more contact with people from another race or ethnic group in 2014 than before. First, respondents were more likely to have been living in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods than previously: this becomes clear after analysing the answers to the question about how diverse the respondents' neighbourhood was. According to respondents' responses to this question in 2002 (displayed in [FIGURE 8](#)), 63 per cent of all neighbourhoods did not include people from a different race or ethnic group, while in 2014 this figure had dropped to approximately 47 per cent. Further, the number of neighbourhoods with many people from a different race or ethnic group increased from about 9 per cent in 2002 to about 15 per cent in 2014. A diverse neighbourhood in itself is, however, not a sufficient guarantee that respondents will actually enter into contact with people from another race or ethnic group, although their likelihood to do so increases.

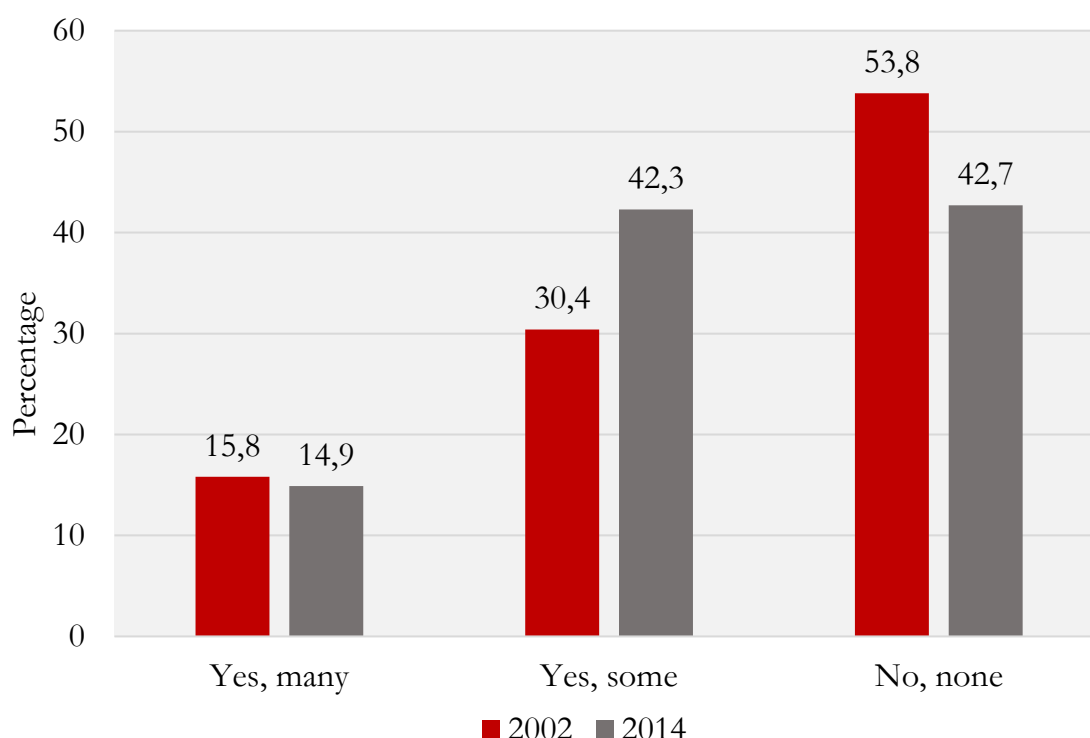
Therefore, respondents were asked about the number of friends they had from a different race or ethnic group. The results are displayed in **FIGURE 9**. In 2014, respondents more frequently indicated that they had some or multiple good friends of a different race or ethnic background compared with the figure in 2002. This indicates that in 2014, respondents indeed more often had contact with and more often sustained friendship ties with minorities compared with in 2002.

We can conclude that there is some evidence that in 2014 ethnic diversity had further progressed, and that the level of segregation had dropped, both in terms of neighbourhoods where people live and in terms of contact and friendship. It could be that this trend may be an explanation as to why people were slightly more positive toward migration in 2014 than they were earlier.

**FIGURE 8.** *How would you describe the area where you currently live?*



**FIGURE 9.** *‘Do you have any close friends who are of a different race or ethnic group than most Belgian people?’*



### The role of background characteristics

So far, we have only considered average scores and percentages for the whole population. However, sociodemographic background characteristics (here, age, gender and education level) can exert an influence on people's attitudes. Therefore, we examined how these characteristics are associated with how people think about migration. In the first step, we did this separately for these three characteristics. In the next step, we assessed whether any associations found still remain while controlling for the effect of other characteristics. For example, it may be that the age effect will become less strong once the influence of educational level is controlled for.

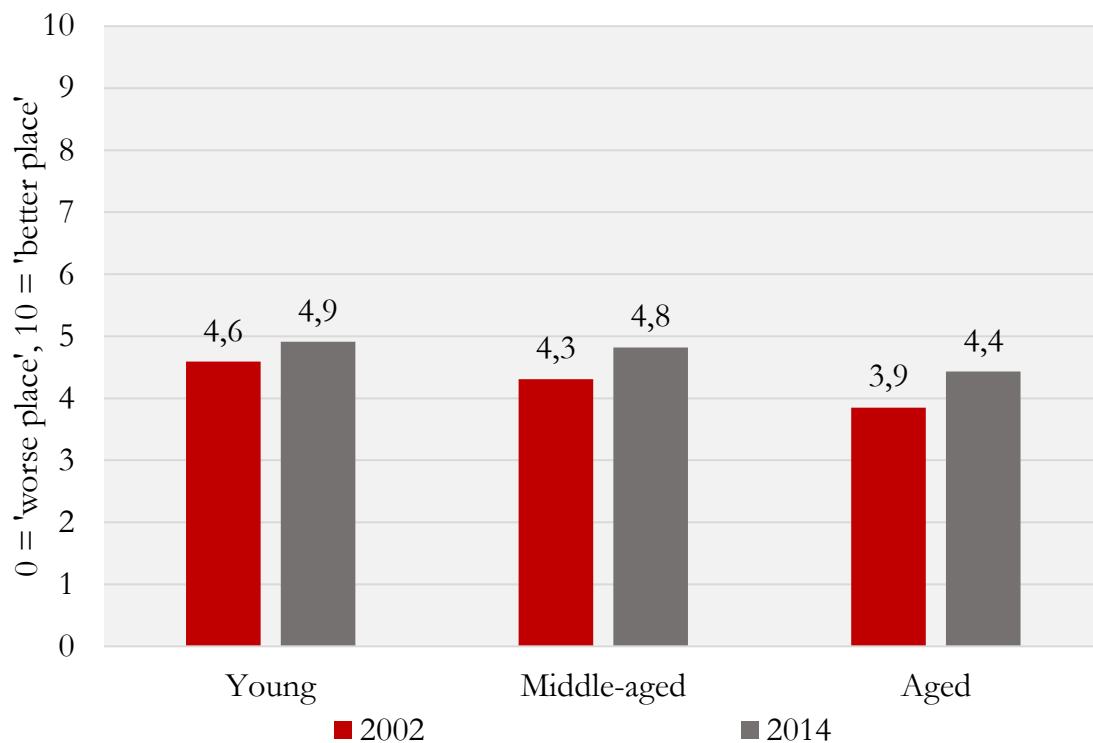
In terms of age, we can draw a clear conclusion. We separated the survey population into three broad age categories: young (<25), middle-aged (26–64) and aged (>65). Subsequently, we assessed their opinions about migration. **FIGURE 10** reveals that younger people are less negative about migration compared with middle-aged and aged people. Possibly, older people still have to get used to this new, unfamiliar situation, which means a major change from the past. However, there is some evolution: in each age category, including the aged people, respondents were more positive toward migration in 2014 than in 2002.



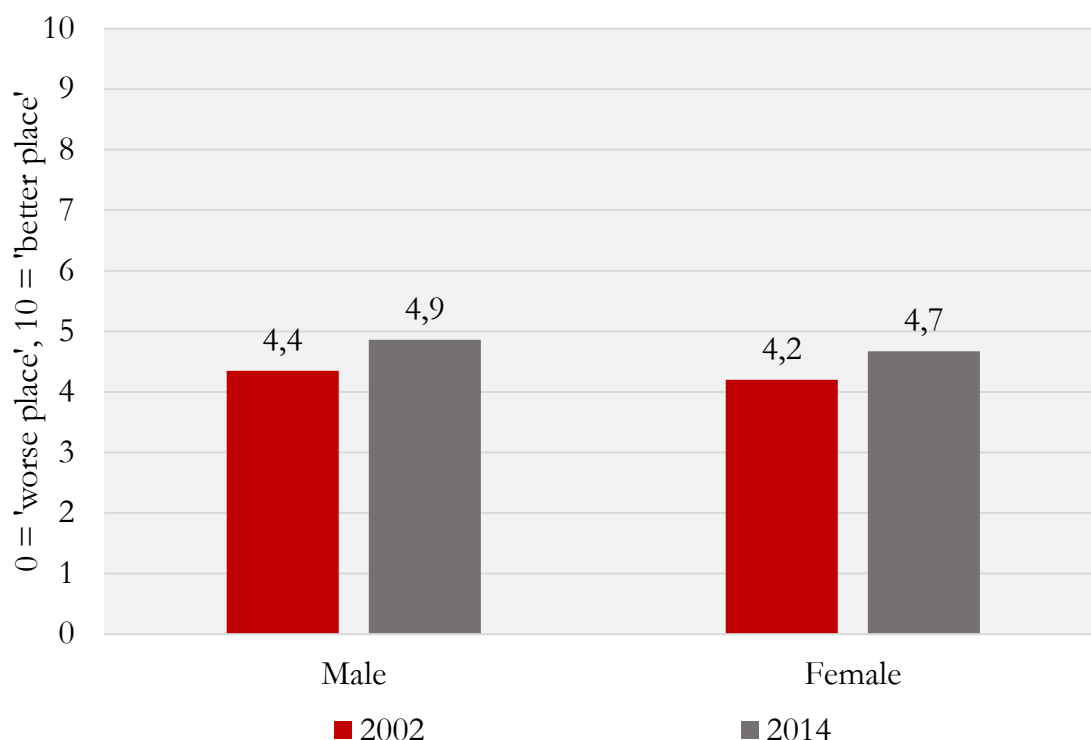
In terms of gender, we note small differences (**FIGURE 11**): men were more positive toward migration in 2002 and 2014 compared with women, although the difference is very small. Both sexes become more positive toward migration over time.

Lastly, the role of education was assessed (**FIGURE 12**). We use four categories that refer to the highest level of education a respondent had completed (no degree, primary education, secondary education and higher education). People with a higher educational level are more positive toward migration compared with people who have a lower educational level. As the educational level rises, so does the positivity toward migration. The differences tend to be relatively large; greater than the differences related to age and gender.

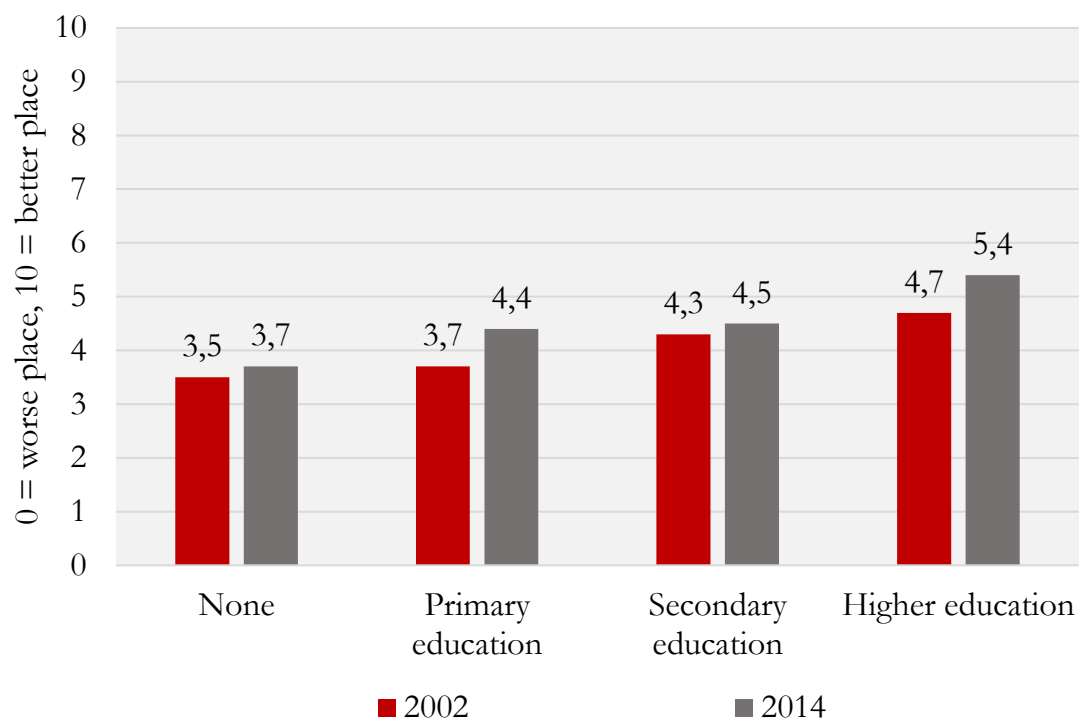
**FIGURE 10.** *‘Is Belgium made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?’ – Age*



**FIGURE 11.** *Is Belgium made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?’ – Gender*



**FIGURE 12.** *Is Belgium made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?’ – Education level*



We have so far assessed the relationship between background characteristics and attitudes toward migration separately. In the next step, we assess whether the results hold when we examine the relationship between various background characteristics and migration attitudes simultaneously. Accordingly, we investigate how various explanations are associated with anti-immigrant attitudes. This is done via regression analysis, a statistical analysis technique. A regression analysis assesses to what extent we can better explain or predict the behaviour of a particular characteristic (the dependent variable) via knowledge about multiple other characteristics (independent variables). With regard to this report, we try to shed more light on which factors are related to how people think about migration. In addition to age, gender and educational level, we add some other characteristics that are mentioned in scientific literature as potentially explaining negative attitudes to migration, such as the level of political interest, (lack of) satisfaction about income and political ideology. Anti-immigrant attitudes are measured by taking the average score of the Belgian respondents on three questions about migration. **TABLE 5** gives a detailed overview of the measurement of the dependent and independent variables. We repeated the same analysis for all seven ESS rounds in which Belgium has participated.

**TABLE 6** gives an overview of the results. We first further explain some of the terms used. The table contains the ‘explained variance’; the variance in the attitude toward migration that can be explained by the independent variables. The explained variance gives an indication of the explanatory power of the characteristics: a higher amount of explained variance points to a better model. We can see that approximately 15 per cent of the variance in anti-immigrant attitudes is explained by the model. Further, the table contains a regression coefficient for each independent variable. This coefficient expresses the change in the attitude toward migration whenever the independent variable increases by one unit (while controlling for the other variables). For the interpretation of the coefficients, the following rule applies: a positive value (above zero) signifies a positive attitude toward migration when the specific characteristic increases, and a negative value (below zero) points to a negative attitude toward migration when the characteristic increases. The coefficients or calculated values for the various characteristics have been standardized. This means that they can be compared with each other: the higher the coefficient, the stronger the effect. Lastly, the signs (asterisks) indicate the level of significance and make clear whether the obtained results are statistically significant or not. We maintain a confidence interval of 95 per cent. Please note that for these coefficients, the influence of the other characteristics in the model has been neutralized.

Using this information, we can interpret the findings in **TABLE 6**. While simultaneously controlling for background characteristics, we note that gender does not play a role at all: male and female respondents do not significantly differ in the way they judge migration. The role of age, however, is confirmed in the analysis: a higher age is associated with more negative attitudes toward migration. The importance of educational level becomes

evident again: for all the ESS rounds we find that a higher level of education is associated with a more positive attitude toward migration. We note a similar trend for political interest: people who are more interested in politics are more positive toward migration. However, people who self-identify as being right-wing are more negative toward migration. Greater satisfaction with income is also associated with more positive attitudes toward migration.

We can compare the strength of the coefficients and, in this way, assess which factors exert the largest influence on attitudes toward migration: political interest and educational level seem to be the most decisive, followed by political ideology, satisfaction with income, and age. Gender, as already stated, does not play a role.

Lastly, using data from the ESS round 7 we examine the effects of a number of additional characteristics. In this round, respondents were asked about contact with people from a different ethnic group or race. The expectation is that those respondents who often have contact with other ethnic groups and have friends with a different ethnic background or race, will be more positive toward migrants. The interpretation of the variables is that positive coefficients point to a positive effect on the attitude toward migration. **TABLE 7** shows the results of the analysis. Entering into contact with people with a different ethnic background or race, and maintaining friendship ties with them, are positively associated with positive attitudes toward migrants. The correlations that were established before also hold, except that age does not play a role anymore. Moreover, the explained variance rises from about 15 to 23 per cent whenever contact and friendship with people from another ethnic group or race are included as variables in the analysis.

**TABLE 5.** *Measurement of dependent and independent variables in regression analysis*

Dependent variable	Question	Categories
Attitude about migration	1. Would you say it is generally bad or good for Belgium's economy that people come to live here from other countries? (0 = 'bad', 10 = 'good')	0 = 'very negative attitude toward migration' to 10 = 'very positive attitude toward migration'
	2. Would you say that Belgium's cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries? (0 = 'undermined', 10 = 'enriched')	Note: the variable is the average of the score on the three statements
	3. Is Belgium made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries? (0 = 'worse place', 10 = 'better place')	
Independent variables	Question	Categories
Sex	What is the gender of the respondent?	1 = 'male', 2 = 'female'
Age	What is the age of the respondent?	In years
Level of education	What is the highest level obtained?	1 = 'lower than primary education to 7 = 'master degree'
Political interest	How interested are you in politics?	1 = 'not interested at all' to 4 = 'very interested'
Right-wing	In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	0 = 'left-wing' to 10 = 'right-wing'
Income satisfaction	Which of the descriptions comes closest to how you feel about your household's income nowadays?	1 = 'very difficult to live on present income' to 4 = 'living comfortably on present income'

**TABLE 6.** *Results of regression analysis: explaining attitudes toward migration using background characteristics in the ESS*

ESS round	Explained variance	Intercept	Female	Age	Level of education	Political interest	Right-wing ideology	Income satisfaction
ESS1 (2002)	0.085	7.102	0.000	-0.115***	0.056	0.215***	-0.113***	0.045
ESS2 (2004)	0.150	6.318	-0.019	-0.110***	0.231***	0.121***	-0.125***	0.086***
ESS3 (2006)	0.177	7.068	-0.047	-0.113***	0.221***	0.169***	-0.134***	0.117***
ESS4 (2008)	0.105	7.803	-0.028	-0.125***	0.062*	0.208***	-0.078***	0.137***
ESS5 (2010)	0.140	7.010	-0.028	-0.124***	0.165***	0.180***	-0.145***	0.104***
ESS6 (2012)	0.145	8.313	-0.017	-0.153***	0.068**	0.248***	-0.160***	0.122***
ESS7 (2014)	0.158	8.229	-0.037	-0.099***	0.099***	0.245***	-0.125***	0.199***

*Notes:* Dependent variable = attitude toward migration. The table displays standardized coefficients. 95 per cent confidence interval: \*\*\*  $p < 0.05$

**TABLE 7.** *Results of a regression analysis on the ESS round 7: explaining attitudes toward migration using contact and friendship with people from a different ethnic group or race*

	Beta coefficient
Constant	0.923***
Female	-0.008
Age	0.033
Level of education	0.090***
Political interest	0.211***
Right-wing ideology	-0.090***
Income satisfaction	0.208***
Friendship people different ethnic group or race	0.193***
Contact people different ethnic group or race	0.176***
Explained variance	0.023

*Notes:* Dependent variable = attitude toward migration. 95 per cent confidence interval: \*\*\*  $p < 0.05$

## Conclusion

In this report, using ESS data we examine in detail the attitude of Belgian respondents toward migration. The goal is to obtain a better understanding of this topic and to provide objective results to enhance the public debate about migration. Generally, people are more negative than positive toward migration. The respondents are mostly worried about the potential negative consequences of migration and people are concerned that migration will have a detrimental impact on the economy. More in particular, people fear that migration will lead to more competition in the labour market, and rising expenditure on social security and the welfare state. However, Belgian respondents are most negative about the consequences of migration for crime figures. The cultural consequences of migration are evaluated in a slightly more positive way. Importantly, there is an evolution over time. The data suggests that Belgian respondents have become somewhat more positive about migration and its consequences compared with before. We note a slight positive trend toward more tolerance.

There is a hierarchy in terms of the preference for particular groups of migrants: Belgian respondents differentiate between the type of migrant group they prefer to welcome into the country. People of a similar race or ethnic background are more welcome than people from another race or ethnic background or people coming from poor countries outside Europe. Further, Jewish people appear to be more welcome than Muslims or Gypsies. Especially with regard to the arrival of this latter group, Belgian respondents do not display a lot of enthusiasm.

A segment of the Belgians surveyed agree with the statement that ethnic groups and races differ, in the sense that some groups are considered more intelligent and harder working, and that some cultures are better than others. They agree that some groups are characterized by particular features, to which a value judgment is attached.

Next, it seems that respondents systematically overestimate the number of people in Belgium who were born outside the country. Respondents have a tendency to estimate the actual presence as much higher than it is in reality. Possibly this may be due to intensive media coverage about migration, or due to the political discourse of particular political parties that underline migration as a core political issue.

One potential reason for why we note a slight evolution toward a more positive attitude concerning migration may lie in the fact that ethnic diversity has increased. The neighbourhoods where people live are more diverse today than before, pointing to lower segregation. This also becomes evident when assessing people's interactions: more people have friendship ties with individuals from another race or ethnic group. Scientific literature shows that more contact with minority groups presents an important buffer, which is a very powerful way to stimulate tolerance and fight prejudice. Analysis indeed confirms this



assumption: contact and friendship with people from a different ethnic group or race results in more positive attitudes toward migrants.

Lastly, there are differences in terms of attitudes toward migration dependent upon people's background characteristics. Generally, younger people are more positive toward migration compared with older people, and the same holds for men, even though the difference between the sexes is generally very small and disappears when controlling for other aspects (such as people's ideology or their degree of interest in politics). The largest differences are found for educational level and political interest: highly-educated people and people with a high level of political interest hold more positive attitudes toward migration compared with lower-educated people and those with less interest in politics. Ideology matters as well: self-identification as being right-wing is associated with more negative attitudes toward migration. Finally, satisfaction with income also plays a role: people who indicate satisfaction with their present income also hold more positive attitudes toward migration. Attitudes toward migration, put differently, is also influenced by the economic situation of people, characteristics such as age and gender, and by their political preferences.

In conclusion, we can state that although Belgians' attitudes toward migration are relatively stable, we do note some positive evolutions. Respondents have become more understanding when it comes to migration in recent times.

## Contact

The ESS survey in Belgium is prepared, conducted and valorized by the Centre for Survey Methodology (KU Leuven) for Flanders and the Centre d'Etude de l'Opinion (Université de Liège) for Wallonia.

The ESS documentation and datasets are freely available to anyone after registration. All the data and information is available on the following web site:

<http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

## Literature suggestions

In this section we offer some suggestions for scientific research about the topic of anti-immigrant attitudes. These can subsequently serve for further reading.

- Ceobanu, A. M., & Escandell, X. (2010). Comparative analyses of public attitudes toward immigrants and immigration using multinational survey data: A review of theories and research. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36(1): 209–328.
- Ceobanu, A. M. (2011). Usual suspects? Public views about immigrants' impact on crime in European countries. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 52(1-2): 114–131
- Davidov, E., Meuleman, B., Billiet, J., & Schmidt, P. (2008). Values and support for immigration: A cross-country comparison. *European Sociological Review*, 24(5): 583–599.
- Fitzgerald, J., Curtis A. K., & Corliss, C. L. (2011). Anxious publics: Worries about crime and immigration. *Comparative Political Studies*, 45(4): 477–506.
- Hainmueller, J., & Hopkins, D. J. (2014). Public attitudes toward immigration. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 17(1): 225–249.
- Mayda, A. M. (2006) 'Who is against immigration?' A cross-country investigation of individual attitudes toward immigrants. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 88(3): 510–530.
- McLaren, L. (2003). Anti-immigrant prejudice in Europe: Contact, threat perception, and preferences for the exclusion of migrants. *Social Forces*, 81(3): 909–936.
- Meuleman, B., Davidov E., & Billiet, J. (2009). Changing attitudes toward immigration in Europe, 2002-2007: A dynamic group conflict theory approach. *Social Science Research*, 38(2): 352–365.
- O'Rourke, K. H., & Sinnot, R. (2006). The determinants of individual attitudes towards immigration. *European Journal of Political Economy*, 22(4): 838–861.
- Rustenbach, E. (2010). Sources of negative attitudes toward immigrants in Europe: A multilevel analysis. *International Migration Review*, 44(1): 53–77.
- Schneider, S. L. (2008). Anti-immigrant attitudes in Europe: Outgroup size and perceived ethnic threat. *European Sociological Review*, 24(1): 53–67.
- Semyonov, M., Raijman, R. & Gorodzeisky, A. (2006). The rise of anti-foreigner sentiment in European Societies, 1988-2000. *American Sociological Review*, 71(3): 426–449.
- Sides, J., & Citrin, J. (2007). European opinion about immigration: The role of identities, interests and information. *British Journal of Political Science*, 37(3): 477–504.
- Strabac, Z. (2011). It is the eyes and not the size that matter. *European Societies*, 13(4): 559–582.
- Ward, C. & Masgoret, A. M. (2006). An integrative model of attitudes toward immigrants. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 30(6): 671–682.